DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 415 075 RC 021 345

AUTHOR	Peterson, Leighton C.
TITLE	Tuning In to Navajo: The Role of Radio in Native Language Maintenance.
PUB DATE	1997-00-00
NOTE	9p.; In: Teaching Indigenous Languages; see RC 021 328.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Audience Response; Dialects; *Language Maintenance; Language Styles; Language Usage; *Mass Media Role; Mass Media Use; *Navajo; *Navajo (Nation); Programming (Broadcast); *Radio

ABSTRACT

Since 1986, KTNN Radio (tribally owned) has broadcast Navajo-language programming to the entire Navajo Nation. Its large broadcast range and position as the "Voice of the Navajo Nation" gives KTNN the "symbolic" power to affect linguistic change, as well as the unenviable position of being held to a high language standard although no such "standard" exists. Navajo-language programming is aimed primarily at adults and consists of news, livestock reports, public service announcements, and country and western music. One of the biggest issues facing KTNN is trying to define the type of Navajo that should be spoken. The realities of radio broadcasting, mainly the need to be brief, have led to development of "Broadcast Navajo," which includes the use of English words or Navajo slang in place of more lengthy, descriptive "formal" Navajo. Listener complaints about Broadcast Navajo are frequent, although some complaints result from regional language differences and the unstandardized nature of Navajo. KTNN could address its responsibility to the language by broadcasting regular language-instruction programming, providing youth-oriented entertainment and music programming in Navajo (perhaps with Navajo youth as announcers), standardizing frequently encountered terminology in news and entertainment, requiring announcers to improve language skills as a condition of employment, using listener complaints in future language planning and standardization, and securing grant money for these efforts. (SV)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Jon Reyhner
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

ED 415 075

Tuning in to Navajo: The Role of Radio in Native Language Maintenance

Leighton C. Peterson

This paper discusses the realities of radio in indigenous language maintenance with a case study of KTNN, a Navajo language station. The relationship between audience, language, and programming is analyzed, and more effective uses of radio are suggested.

Joshua Fishman (1991) and other scholars have noted the influence of the mass media as a factor in language choice in the contemporary world. In Native American communities, English-language videos, television, and popular music have replaced storytelling and other traditional medium, contributing to language shift among many Native American youth. However, the last 20 years has also brought a growing number of indigenous-language media in the United States and Canada, especially radio. This paper discusses the realities of radio's role in language maintenance using a case study of KTNN, the largest indigenous-language commercial signal in the world, and suggests ways in which radio can be utilized more effectively in Navajo-language maintenance.

Allan Bell asserts that "broadcast media play a multiple role—active as well as passive—in language standardization…broadcast media reflect the language evaluations of the society at large" (1983, p. 29). Standardization is a factor in language maintenance, yet Navajo has no accepted standard. However, Navajo-language broadcasters and their audience are actively creating a standard through daily programs and subsequent spirited feedback. Bell continues to say that "broadcast speech is the most public of languages. Its hearers are the largest simultaneous audience of the spoken language" (1983, p. 37). When discussing language maintenance, however, it is important to note who the actual and intended audience is. My data indicate that Navajo announcers often tailor their language to an older, monolingual audience and for various reasons, younger Navajos do not actively seek out Navajo-language broadcasts. As the lack of younger listeners will impact the future of the language, the relationship between audience, language, and programming is analyzed below.

Broadcasting in the Navajo language has been around for quite some time, although prior to 1972 it was limited to small program blocks on border-town stations (Keith, 1995, p. 9). In 1972, the first native-owned, native-language station in the country, KTDB, went on the air in Navajo from Pine Hill, New Mexico, to serve the Ramah Navajo Reservation. The current Navajo-language mediascape includes several Navajo-language radio stations, both public and private, as well as regular programming on local Christian radio. Navajo television station NNTV 5 produces around 4-5 hours of Navajo-language programming per week, ranging from current events to live broadcasts of the Na-

RC 021345

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

vajo Nation Tribal Council sessions. While an important aspect of Navajo language broadcasting, NNTV 5 was received by only 4,300 cable subscribers in 1996, only a small fraction of an estimated population of 180,000. It was not until the establishment of KTNN Radio in 1986 that Navajo-language programming reached the entire Navajo Nation and speakers of all variations of Navajo.

KTNN AM 660

It has been observed that indigenous people around the world establish their own media "to preserve and restore an indigenous language, to improve the self-image of the minority, and to change the negative impressions of the minority that are held by members of the majority culture" (Browne, 1996, p. 59). In the Navajo case, communication in the native language among a widely-dispersed population was a major factor in the Nation applying for and receiving a broadcast license. KTNN's mission statement emphasizes these points: "This will be the first station that will be owned by, and for the benefit of, the Navajo Nation. The programming will emphasize the Navajo culture and lifestyle on the reservation and will in large part be broadcast in the Navajo language" (Fisher, et al., 1981).

KTNN's 50,000 watt clear signal allows it to broadcast well beyond Navajo Nation borders, especially at night, reaching cities as far away as Phoenix and Albuquerque. KTNN's broadcast range and position as "The Voice of the Navajo Nation" (owned by the Nation) gives KTNN what Pierre Bourdieu (1991) has termed the "symbolic" power to affect linguistic change, as well as the unenviable position of being held to a high language standard, even where no such "standard" exists. In terms of language maintenance, KTNN is the single-most important broadcaster of the Navajo language.

Audience and programming

Although KTNN has the potential to reach most Navajo speakers, that does not mean that they all tune in. In the context of language maintenance, it is important to have a wide and diverse audience; however, the audience is determined in part by programming, i.e. the need or desire to listen to Navajo-language programs. KTNN's position as a commercial station, however, requires that programming be funded through advertising revenue. This means that what is best for the language or language maintenance is not always considered, as advertisers cater to those they perceive as holding the purse strings—in this case parents and grandparents.

KTNN has a Country & Western music format "which fits the life-style out here on the Reservation" (K.C.); it also plays traditional and contemporary Native American music in regular rotation. Although KTNN is a for-profit commercial radio station, it is bound to serve the needs of the Navajo people with bilingual broadcasts of news, livestock reports, the President's report, and public service announcements (PSAs) for ceremonies, Chapter meetings, and community events. The music is geared for the 21-60 age group, and the Navajo

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

news and livestock reports are of interest mainly to older Navajos. The PSAs attract a wide range of listeners, and "when kids want to find out if school is closed, they'll listen" (K.C.). KTNN's C&W format, however, does not fit the tastes of many younger Navajos, and they associate KTNN with "Johns" (a derogatory term for Navajos, especially older Navajos, who are perceived to be neither traditional nor assimilated, live in the "sticks," and speak English with a pronounced accent, i.e., "backwoods" B.K.). Therefore, many youth do not willingly tune in to KTNN's Navajo broadcasts, "but if they're stuck at home or in the truck with grandma or their parents, then they have to listen" (K.C.). Some programs, such as sports broadcasts, which may seem youth-oriented actually are not:

> Broadcasting play by play came about when a lot of our elders were...calling us at KTNN and saying, "Hey, why don't you guys do it in Navajo? There's a lot of us who are back at home that would like to know how our grandkids are doing at basketball tournaments." So when we're talking we talk about the directions in a game, the 3 point line...we educate our elders about the game. (R.B.)

Sports play-by-play broadcasts are, however, one way in that KTNN's programming finds new uses for the Navajo language. At the same time, Navajo news broadcasts and feature stories keep the language relevant in the contemporary world. There is also programming designed for the youth, featuring "urban" and dance music. These shows, however, are broadcast in English.

Contributing to the lack of a wide youth audience during Navajo broadcasts is the fact that many younger listeners may not understand the more "traditional" Navajo used by some of KTNN's announcers, many of whom cater to an older, monolingual population: "In my mind there are elderly people listening to KTNN, a lot of people who don't speak English listening to KTNN, so therefore they are primary in my mind when I translate from English into Navajo" (M.G.). They talk of listeners "in the remote areas," "at the hogan level," or "out on the Rez." Therefore, announcers try to speak accordingly. However, as announcer M.G., who is in his 40s, put it: "To continuously talk Navajo at a level where the elders are able to understand is sometimes difficult, and without using the slang...that's hard."

Language

Former program director T.Y. put it best when he said that "one of the biggest issues now facing KTNN is trying to define the type of Navajo that should be spoken." Changes in the Navajo language as a result of broadcasting, such as the constant use of English terms, can have wide-reaching implications in language maintenance. Furthermore, announcers must alter their speech for different audiences, whether using more slang or more "traditional" terms. These factors result in a spirited dialogue between broadcasters and audience on "proper" on-air language. However, even when "proper" language is used, prob-

lems still arise: "I find that no matter how descriptive you are in a story, there is always somebody who does not quite understand what you just said. They have their own interpretations" (J. B.).

The data indicate that KTNN's unique position as a commercial radio station broadcasting in an indigenous language requires subtle changes in the way the Navajo language is used on the air. This type of Navajo has been described by my consultants as "Broadcast Navajo": "Yeah, Broadcast Navajo is different. Broadcast Navajo is a way of speaking Navajo at a level where it's brief and to the point, because of the Navajo language being so difficult" (T.Y.). Another consultant told me that "when you use the 'formal' Navajo with the big vocabulary, it takes about twice as long to say something than with the 'newer' Navajo. We call that 'Broadcast Navajo' for our purposes here, because we have to shorten everything up" (K.C.). Navajo is a very descriptive language and is not easily adjusted to fit the time constraints of 30 second commercials and other unique requirements of entertainment radio, especially since most of KTNN's Navajo-language programming is interpreted directly from written English copy. "To find DJs to speak this type of Navajo on the radio is difficult" (T.Y.).

Many of the DJs at KTNN find it necessary to codeswitch (use English terms) even where there is a "traditional" Navajo term available. For example, when faced with making a 30-second commercial, it is quicker for an announcer to say "Window Rock" than *Tséghahoodzání*; furthermore, it is possible that neither the announcer nor some members of the audience will know the Navajo name for Window Rock or other locations. Codeswitching among KTNN DJs is especially apparent with numbers, place names, addresses, and consumer goods, resulting in a great number of listener complaints. Broadcast Navajo is further characterized by speaking quickly using fillers such as *éíyá* and *áádóó* and incorrect, direct translations from English.

Scholars have noted that "the public is ultrasensitive about broadcast language...accusations that certain broadcasters speak incorrectly are a familiar listener response, usually accompanied by praise for other broadcasters who are held up as models of good speech" (Bell, 1983, p. 38). This appears to hold true for the Navajo case as well. Listener complaints about Broadcast Navajo far outnumber any other listener response, and they can be passionate: "Why is this morning guy still on the air? He can't even speak his own language!" (1994 Letter). "We've been criticized for slaughtering the language.... our purpose is obviously to keep the language alive, but how are we keeping it alive is a question, because of the grammar usage and the lack of knowledge of all the words" (K.C.). Many of these complaints are owing to factors mentioned above, including Navajo and English fluency, domain knowledge, and so forth. However, for Navajo—where there is no official standard—many complaints are simply caused by regional differences in the language:

> What else have we gotten complaints about.... the way we mispronounce words. There's different dialects across the Reservation, and

5 BEST COPY AVAILABLE

> some of our announcers are from the western region and some are from the eastern region, and the same word can be pronounced two different ways. And somebody inevitably will have a complaint that we didn't put the right inflection on it or it has a different meaning from one region to the next. (K.C.)

Newscaster J.B. gave me the following examples:

> *Tódilchxóshí* is one example. When I talk about "pop," I say *tódilchxóshí*, which means "the water that bubbles." But in Gallup area, I notice that they say *tó łkání*, "the sweet water, the tasty water." That's how they say it. And we say damóo *yázhí* for Saturday ["little Sunday"], and some people say *yíská damóo*, which means "tomorrow is Sunday." We just have different translations all the way across. One of our DJs, when he says land, he says *héya*. I say *kéya*. But he means *kÉyah*. But to me, that's the way he talks, that's his language.

From a language maintenance standpoint, many of the complaints mentioned above are legitimate. For example, continued use of English for place names, numbers, and consumer goods will likely aid in the demise of their Navajo equivalents. However, issues relating to regional dialects are more contentious and may or may not be solved with a Broadcast Navajo standard.

Language standards

The way in which KTNN's DJs adapt the Navajo language to a radio format is largely individual choice, based in part on language ability in both English and Navajo, domain knowledge, and their level of experience with radio broadcasting. This, of course, leads to a wide variation in broadcast language. KTNN staff and management discuss the language issue at almost every meeting and have mentioned standardization, but,

> it's hard for us to standardize the Navajo language in a manual that we all take a look at. We've talked about that, and we've talked with Navajo Community College and Rough Rock Demonstration School on helping us come closer to the meanings, but we haven't really been able to formalize anything yet, because it takes time and money to do that. (K.C.)

Without an official standard to follow, other methods to determine "correct" or accepted language use must be found by Navajo-language broadcasters. Browne (1996) notes that when language questions arise, indigenous broadcaster seek help from official outlets such as language commissions, individual experts, or requests to the audience for help. Newscaster J.B. and longtime announcer S.R. were constantly cited as being the Navajo-language experts at KTNN (even though they spoke different regional dialects). J.B. said she has

consulted elders or respected Council delegates herself for language advice. However, being "traditional" or an elder does not make one the best language consultant: Sportscaster R.B. told me that she could not rely on her grandparents for proper terminology and description for basketball play-by-plays "because they don't really know the sport of basketball. But the younger generation, they do."

Audience members offer suggestions on language use; one consultant noted that "if they hear you say something wrong, they'll come up and tell you, 'Don't you think it would be easier to describe it like this?'" (R.B.). J.B. gave me this example of audience oversight:

> Well, there was one time I lost the word for "uncle," and I was talking about this person in a story whose uncle had some kind of deal—I forget what the subject matter was—but I was at a loss for the word uncle. This was a boy to an uncle. And so I was trying to figure out what was the word, what was the proper language when I was reading it, and I kind of...*bik'is* is what I said, which is a brother. And so then the person called me and left a message on the phone and said the right language was *bidá'i*.

This dialogue between announcers and audience—and between the broadcasters themselves—is a sign that the language is vital and alive: "People listen. That [audience feedback] tells me they are listening and it is a serious matter" (J.B.). The recursive relationship between audience, broadcasters, language, and programming is also creating a standard for Broadcast Navajo. Whether or not a standard is needed may never be answered, but Navajo speakers obviously are passionate about "correct" language use and expect their broadcasters to uphold those ideals. When asked who is the final authority on correct on-air language use, however, one announcer replied: "My God. I guess whoever's talking, which would be us...I guess" (R.B.).

Programming for the future

In order to address KTNN's responsibility towards the Navajo language and to foster a younger audience, regular language instruction programming could be developed. This programming should be planned in conjunction with Navajo language instructors in schools and universities and partially utilize KTNN's existing sports and entertainment broadcasts as a vehicle of instruction (i.e., develop pamphlets with basketball and football terminology in Navajo so students can follow play-by-play). Furthermore, entertainment and music programming in the Navajo language geared towards youth could be implemented. Younger Navajo speakers should be the announcers and should be allowed to speak their own version of Navajo (with slang).

There is probably no perfect way to appease all of KTNN's listeners. Nonetheless, KTNN's announcers are held to a higher standard of the Navajo language, and KTNN has a responsibility towards the language. Therefore, sev-

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

eral actions could be taken: 1) Standardize frequently-encountered terminology in news and entertainment, agreed upon by speakers from all parts of the Navajo Nation, 2) Require announcers to improve language skills in both Navajo and English when needed as a condition for continued employment, 3) Log specific, legitimate listener complaints about Broadcast Navajo and utilize them in future language planning and standardization, and 4) Secure grant money for this on the basis of maintaining a Native language in the modern world.

Conclusion

In today's world, commercial radio is a necessary and viable communication outlet for the Navajo language. Commercial radio helps keep the Navajo language alive in many domains with news, sports, and public service broadcasting. It also provides positive exposure for the Navajo people and all Native Americans. However, commercial radio affects the way Navajo is spoken on the air by DJs and announcers, creating a peculiar type of Navajo defined here as "Broadcast Navajo." KTNN helps perpetuate the Navajo language "simply by keeping it out there on the air" (K.C.). However, it is also changing the language. Whether these language changes are being adopted by KTNN's audience would require a much deeper study. If one of KTNN's main goals is the preservation and perpetuation of the Navajo language, then two issues need to be addressed. First, it should be determined if a standard needs to be created for the use of the Navajo language in the electronic media; and second, a way must be found to attract the younger generation of Navajos to Navajo-language broadcasts.

Note: Data for this paper was collected during 1996-97. Appreciation goes to Oswald Werner and the Northwestern University Ethnographic Field School, William Nichols, and the staff of KTNN Radio, Window Rock, Navajo Nation, Arizona.

References

Bell, Allan. (1983). Broadcast news as a language standard. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language, 40*, 29-42.

Bourdieu, Pierre. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.

Browne, Donald. (1996). *Electronic media and indigenous peoples: A voice of our own?* Ames, IA: Iowa University.

Fisher, Wayland, Cooper, & Leader. (1981). Application of the Navajo Nation for a new standard broadcast station at Window Rock, Arizona. Presented to the Federal Communications Commission, Washington, DC, March 6, 1981.

Fishman, Joshua A. (1991). *Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Keith, Michael C. (1995). *Signals in the air: Native broadcasting in America*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Young, Robert, & Morgan, Sr., William. (1987). *The Navajo language: A grammar and colloquial dictionary*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE